'A TWIST OF FATE'

It all started around the summer of 1938. I was thirteen years old and my brother Pep was about eleven and a half and my brother Junior was fourteen. We almost made the front page of the papers. 'A Family Tragedy'

About five or six of us went swimming in an old clay quarry behind Continental Can Co., off Biddle Street. It seemed the water hole was about twenty or thirty feet around. You know when you go back to an old street or neighborhood everything looks smaller. Seventy years ago, it looked big. My brother Pep thought he could swim across. He could only swim with his face in the water while holding his breath. He probably thought he was going on an angle, but he was actually going straight across the middle. About half way, he stopped and raised his head up. We were all watching him because he was the youngest. We had no idea how deep the muddy water was. When he tried to touch the bottom, he couldn't. He was floundering and hollering. Like I said we were all watching him. I was only thirteen, but I knew my brother was drowning. I can't remember all the details but I jumped in and after a few strokes, I got to him. But, Pep had me around the neck and we were struggling and we were both going down. All of a sudden, my brother Junior had jumped out and the three of us were all wrapped up together and going down. I can't remember if any of us touched bottom but we were locked up together. I thought drowning was the most terrible thing I could think of. But it seems to me when I was swallowing water, I just got dizzy. The next thing I remember, I was laying on my back or side and I was looking at Pep, and Junior was kneeling and throwing up mud and water. We had no idea how we got there or what happened. Somehow or other we were all still alive. We were all sick but kids bounce back pretty quick. Then we got the story.

In another mud hole close to us, this guy we hardly knew, heard all the excitement. I don't even know if he could swim or not. He was about sixteen and real tall and heavy. His name was Foozie Fry. Foozie was probably a nickname. It seems he waded in up to his neck. I don't know if he pulled all of us out or one at a time. Probably had his arms around all three of us. We knew him slightly from the neighborhood. But being older and bigger he probably traveled in different circles. Our street, Hannamen Avenue went east and west, only one block long. Patterson Park Avenue went north and south. He lived *right* around the corner on Patterson Park Avenue, about half a block from our house. The biggest decision he ever made, as far as we were concerned, was when he pulled three little boys out of a mud hole on Biddle Street all these years ago.

I'll have to back up a little bit, I'm trying to make a point. My father died when our youngest brother was about two. My mother had five boys and one girl and was on relief. It's called welfare now. Our neighborhood, for blocks around was on relief. It was the middle of the Great Depression. What I'm going to tell you now is probably the one thing in my life I'm truly sorry for.

It was probably the night before or Christmas Eve when a knock came on the front door. Some people from a Chruch came in with a basket of food. It wasn't long after that, another knock and more food in big bags. I should have told you about this earlier. Kids should never do this today. But, we would sneak into back yards and look for Pepsi or Coke bottles. The whole area where we lived were row houses. They were two cent deposit bottles. A guy that ran a little grocery store would give us a penny a piece for them. After about twenty bottles, we would cash them in. About ten or fifteen cents a piece was pretty good money for two boys during the Depression.

I haven't gotten to the point, yet. This night before Christmas, we were prowling for bottles and we saw this window box by a kitchen window. Everbody had a window box. It kept you from buying ice in the winter time. No one had a refrigerator. When we looked in, I couldn't believe it. There was a ham, probably a shank half. Don't forget everybody was poor back then. I don't even like writing this but "I stole the ham" and we ran down the alley to our back yard about half a block away and made up this scam. Of couse, I don't remember all the details. But, we ended up going around the front and putting the ham on the front steps and banging on the door. Then we ran around back and came in the back door about the time my mother was coming back into the kitchen with the ham. I remember how happy she was. Imagine, having a ham for Christmas. I haven't gotten to the point yet. It was wrong, what we did. I mean, what I did. On another story I wrote called ' My Life', I never told about this.

My brother and I went back to the old neighborhood to look around. But a few weeks back, I went back alone because something was bothering me and I wanted to clear it up. No matter how I figure it, it comes out the same. From that window box to my back yard. Finally, here's the point. It was the rear of the house where Foozie Fry lived, the guy who saved out lives, seventy years ago.

My mother died several years back and she never knew about the 'drowning' or the 'Christmas ham'. I never told her.